

FOOD SAFETY PRACTICES CRITICAL PART OF STORM AWARENESS

WASHINGTON, Aug. 29, 2006 – With Tropical Storm Ernesto heading for U.S. coastal areas, USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service urges consumers to prepare for possible adverse weather by reviewing USDA's recommendations for keeping food safe before, during and after a hurricane or tropical storm, especially one accompanied by power outages and flooding

A Consumer's Guide to Food Safety: Severe Storms and Hurricanes, is available on FSIS' Web site, www.fsis.usda.gov.

The *Consumer's Guide* provides specific food safety recommendations after tropical storms and hurricanes. The guidelines also include recommendations about what to do with food stored in refrigerators and freezers. Specific recommendations that will help consumers in hurricane-prone states include:

FOOD SAFETY AND POWER OUTAGES

- Keep the refrigerator and freezer doors closed as much as possible to maintain the cold temperature. Each time the door is opened, a significant amount of cold air is lost.
- The refrigerator will keep food safely cold for about 4 hours if it is unopened. A full freezer will hold the temperature for approximately 48 hours (24 hours if it is half full and the door remains closed.)
- Food may be safely refrozen if it still contains ice crystals or is at 40° F or below.
- Never taste a food to determine its safety!
- Obtain dry or block ice to keep your refrigerator and freezer as cold as possible if the power is going to be out for a prolonged period of time. Fifty pounds of dry ice should hold an 18-cubic-foot full freezer for 2 days.
- If the power has been out for several days, then check the temperature of the freezer with an appliance thermometer or food thermometer. If the temperature is at 40° F or below, the food is safe.
- If a thermometer has not been kept in the freezer, then check each package of food to determine its safety. If the food still contains ice crystals, or is at 40° F or below then the food is safe.
- Discard refrigerated perishable foods such as meat, poultry, fish, soft cheeses, milk, eggs, leftovers and deli items after 4 hours without power.

WHEN FLOODING OCCURS

- Do not eat any food that may have come into contact with flood water.
- Discard any food that is not in a waterproof container if there is any chance that it has come into contact with flood water. Food containers that are not waterproof include those with screw-caps, snap lids, pull tops, and crimped caps. Also, discard cardboard juice/milk/baby formula boxes and home canned foods if they have come in contact with flood water, because they cannot be effectively cleaned and sanitized.

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- Inspect canned foods and discard any food in damaged cans. Can damage is shown by swelling; leakage; punctures; holes; fractures; extensive deep rusting; or crushing/denting severe enough to prevent normal stacking or opening with a manual, wheel-type can opener.
- Undamaged, commercially prepared foods in all-metal cans and retort pouches (for example, flexible, shelf-stable juice or seafood pouches) can be saved if you do the following:
 - Remove the labels, if they are the removable kind, since they can harbor dirt and bacteria.
 - Thoroughly wash the cans or retort pouches with soap and water, using hot water if it is available.
 - Brush or wipe away any dirt or silt.
 - Rinse the cans or retort pouches with water that is safe for drinking, if available, since dirt or residual soap will reduce the effectiveness of chlorine sanitation.
 - Then, sanitize them by immersion in one of the two following ways:
 - place in water and allow the water to come to a boil and continue boiling for 2 minutes,
or
 - place in a freshly-made solution consisting of 1 tablespoon of unscented liquid chlorine bleach per gallon of drinking water (or the cleanest, clearest water available) for 15 minutes.
 - Air dry cans or retort pouches for a minimum of 1 hour before opening or storing.
 - If the labels were removable, then re-label your cans or retort pouches, including the expiration date (if available), with a marker.
 - Food in reconditioned cans or retort pouches should be used as soon as possible, thereafter.
 - Any concentrated baby formula in reconditioned, all-metal containers must be diluted with clean, drinking water.
- Thoroughly wash metal pans, ceramic dishes, and utensils (including can openers) with soap and water, using hot water if available. Rinse, and then sanitize them by boiling in clean water or immersing them for 15 minutes in a solution of 1 tablespoon of unscented, liquid chlorine bleach per gallon of drinking water (or the cleanest, clearest water available).
- Thoroughly wash countertops with soap and water, using hot water if available. Rinse, and then sanitize by applying a solution of 1 tablespoon of unscented, liquid chlorine bleach per gallon of drinking water (or the cleanest, clearest water available). Allow to air dry.

Consumers with food safety questions can "Ask Karen," the FSIS virtual representative available 24 hours a day at http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Food_Safety_Education/Ask_Karen/index.asp#Question. The toll-free USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854) is available in English and Spanish and can be reached from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. (Eastern Time) Monday through Friday. Recorded food safety messages are available 24 hours a day.